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AUTHOR	McDonnell, Lorraine M.
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ABSTRACT

This digest briefly reviews major approaches to restructuring American schools and evaluates their potential for improving student learning and their feasibility--politically, financially, and administratively. The following reasons for restructuring are discussed: (1) poor educational performance; and (2) the changing skills needed for today's jobs. The following restructuring options are evaluated: (1) decentralizing authority over schools, which includes school-based management, more professional teaching conditions, and school choice in public education; (2) holding schools more accountable for performance; (3) altering the content and process of classroom instruction; and (4) strengthening school-community links. Possible problems with these proposals for restructuring are identified. (JS)

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RESTRUCTURING AMERICAN SCHOOLS: THE PROMISE AND THE PITFALLS

by Lorraine M. McDonnell

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Restructuring American Schools: The Promise and the Pitfalls

Introduction

Despite continuous innovations in American elementary and secondary education over the past 30 years, the nation's schools and classrooms remain basically unchanged. Now a different set of ideas, joined under the banner of "school restructuring," is gaining momentum. Will restructuring transform American education, or is it just another educational fad? This paper views major approaches to restructuring and asks:

- What is the evidence that various restructuring proposals will actually improve student learning?
- How feasible—politically, financially, and administratively—are these proposals?

The challenge is to implement and sustain the excellence and creativity in individual schools on a widespread basis in schools with different kinds of students, resources, and community preferences. Whether significant and broad-based restructuring is possible will depend not only on how well various proposals increase student learning, but also on how well they can fit within political and financial realities.

Why Restructure?

Demands from powerful political constituencies, coupled with a remarkable consensus—both inside and outside of schools—that the educational system is not working as well as it should, have led to calls for a major restructuring of American education. Two problems motivate the current restructuring movement—the poor performance of the educational system and the changing nature of work and workers.

Poor Educational Performance

Scores on standardized tests show only modest achievement in areas requiring problem-solving skills; American students' scores are low compared with those in other countries; and a troubling gap persists between whites and minorities and between boys and girls. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that "more than half of the nation's 17-year-olds appear to be inadequately prepared either to perform competently in jobs that require technical skills or to benefit substantially from specialized on-the-job training."

The educational system also confronts looming teacher shortages and growing concerns about teacher quality. To meet the demand for new teachers over the next few years, 23 percent of each college graduating class would have to go into teaching; in 1985, only 8.7 percent did. Further, most teaching recruits are now drawn from the bottom group of those taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The few top scorers who are recruited into teaching tend to leave the profession after only a few years.

Work and Workers Change

Concern about the United States' ability to compete in world markets has directed much attention to the link between education and employment. Can U.S. schools effectively teach the skills their students will need in the workplace? Three types of skills, not traditionally required of those in lower-level jobs, are increasingly critical. The first is a higher level of cognitive problem-solving skills, including knowing how to learn. The second is flexibility—knowing how to perform a variety of tasks. The third is teamwork abilities, including the capacity to resolve conflicts.

The evidence on how effectively schools are teaching these skills is limited. However, the most common form of teaching and learning in schools—passive presentation of information and an emphasis on individual work and achievement—is at odds with the active learning and teamwork now being stressed in industry.

Further, the workforce itself is changing. In a decade, only 15 percent of the new entrants to the labor force will be native white males, compared to 47 percent in that category today. The new workforce entrants will be those whom the nations' schools have most poorly educated—minorities, women, and immigrants.

Restructuring Options

Restructuring options, listed in order of prominence in reform discussions, are:

- Decentralizing authority over schools.
- Holding schools more accountable.
- Altering the content and process of classroom instruction.
- Strengthening school-community links.

Decentralizing Authority

Critics of public schools say that they are over-bureaucratic, over-centralized, and unduly constrained by standardized rules and procedures. Three main options for dealing with this problem are: school-based management (SBM), more professional teaching conditions, and family choice of schools.

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School-based Management. Based on the premise that schools have different cultures and needs, SBM proponents argue that state and local officials should let each school decide how to organize itself and solve its own problems. This means giving school-site staff greater control over budget, personnel, and curriculum. The argument is not that SBM will directly lead to higher student test scores, but that where it works effectively, schools will be more conducive to learning.

By definition, SBM promotes variation among schools. If such variation is a response to differing school needs, it is an advantage. If it reflects differing levels of either capacity or commitment, it is a problem. In the past, increased top-down management has been at least partially a response to inequities across schools in resource allocation, teacher expertise, course offerings, or instructional practices. If SBM is to work as intended, districts must ensure that all schools have the expertise to make budgetary, personnel, and curriculum decisions. Some schools will need only a limited amount of initial training and planning time. Others will require districts to provide assistance over a much longer period.

More Professional Teaching Conditions. Some scholars and policymakers argue that the solution to problems of teacher supply and quality is to make teaching more professional. This might occur with greater teacher autonomy and a differentiated staffing structure giving some teachers leadership responsibilities. For teachers, autonomy means the ability to exercise their best judgment about the most effective ways to teach the students in their own classrooms. It also means that teachers would be partners in decisions about budget, personnel, and curriculum.

It is too early to tell whether experiments in shared governance or teacher autonomy are helping students learn more. Nevertheless, teacher participation in decision-making is associated with reduced teacher absenteeism and turnover. The implication is that with greater autonomy, teachers will feel better about their jobs and teach more effectively.

Two feasibility issues need to be faced. First, creating a larger role for teachers is sometimes perceived to be at the expense of school administrators. Second, classroom teachers themselves do not support all of the strategies designed to strengthen teacher autonomy. Much more important to teachers are items affecting basic working conditions, such as class size limits, higher salaries, and guaranteed preparation time. Until they have achieved these, rank-and-file teachers are unlikely to accept reforms that require new roles and commitment from them.

Choice in Public Education. Three states—Arkansas, Iowa, and Minnesota—recently enacted legislation allowing parents to enroll their children in virtually any public school in the state. Fifteen other states are considering such proposals.

Three key assumptions underlie the concept of public school choice. First, if parents have the option of leaving schools that do not perform at acceptable levels, schools will become more responsive. Second, educators will configure personnel, curriculum, and instructional time in ways so as to *create* clear choices. Third, if schools are more responsive, parents will become more actively involved in school activities, and students will work harder. No empirical tests of these assumptions have yet been made. Available evidence suggests that there is no direct relationship between choice and students' academic performance. Further, while competition can motivate schools to be more responsive to parental preferences, many will lack the resources to do so.

A change as profound as moving away from mandatory student assignment could have trouble gaining political support. Opposition does exist. Groups representing the interests of minority students argue that choice programs would discriminate against children of poor parents. If choice programs involve competitive admissions, impose ethnic quotas, or even set enrollment limits because of personnel constraints, students may have unequal access to different types of schooling opportunities. Insufficient outreach to inform parents or inadequate transportation can exacerbate inequities.

As with most restructuring options, costs are a challenge. Magnets cost from 10 to 12 percent more to operate than traditional schools, and some specialty schools are considerably more expensive than that. If schools differentiate themselves in significant ways—particularly if they reduce their size—at least some will cost more than traditional schools.

These feasibility issues are not insurmountable, but they do suggest that designers of choice plans will need to insure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn about available options and then to enroll in the school of their choice. Furthermore, because the relationship between school choice and student achievement is not clearly established, promoting choice in that way may raise unrealistic expectations in parents and the general public. Choice might be more credibly proposed as a way to build support for public schooling, and to increase parental satisfaction and student engagement.

Finally, choice is based on the notion that a quasi-market system will make schools more responsive and efficient. But markets are arenas for narrow, self-interested transactions and do not reflect broader community values. The larger community of a city or a state may have different expectations about student outcomes than the school's immediate clientele. The competing interests in a system of democratic governance may have made public schools inefficient, but they are also the way we transcend the narrow interests of single constituencies and socialize students into the pluralistic society in which they must live and work.

Accountability

Accountability became linked with school restructuring when the National Governors' Association, in 1986, recommended that in exchange for better student results, states would loosen control of local districts. State governments are now using data about school performance to reward, punish, and assist schools. About 25 states have policies that range from granting exemptions from state regulation to direct state intervention in the day-to-day operations of chronically low-performing districts.

Educators take accountability data seriously and attempt to improve student performance on whatever indicators higher governmental levels stress. However, even in those

states that collect a variety of data, only student achievement on standardized tests is stressed as important, and most tests still focus on basic skills. The effect in many schools has been to narrow the curriculum. Nevertheless, the very power of indicator systems suggests that if the appropriate indicators are used, they could be a potent tool in motivating schools to teach tomorrow's skills.

At a technical level, states and local districts need to develop indicators that reveal not just student test scores, but the entire range of school experience. States need to compare districts and schools fairly, giving adequate consideration to their differing resource levels and student composition.

But the technical difficulties pale in comparison with the philosophical and political issues. Where significant authority has devolved to the school level, how much responsibility should state governments, local districts, and individual teachers and principals each bear for student outcomes? Where students can attend any school in a given state, what role do local districts play and to whom are they accountable? How much authority should be ceded to the teaching profession to define its own standards? How much should be retained by elected officials?

Further, to whom are schools accountable? Those with a stake in public schooling include parents and students, the American public broadly defined, and a variety of other constituencies, including employers. How much accountability do individual schools owe to each constituency? Those advocating decentralization of authority to the school level assume that the greatest accountability is owed to students and parents. How much latitude should be left to school-level communities, given broader concerns about democratic values, labor markets larger than the local community, and equal access to learning opportunities across different schools?

Altering Classroom Instruction

Comprehensive curriculum reform was tried several decades ago by the National Science Foundation (NSF) with only modest success. Despite these efforts, the classroom of today is little different from one of 20 years ago.

Of all the restructuring strategies, those aimed at the content of classroom instruction are most directly related to the problems of underachievement and the need for new workplace skills. Curriculum restructuring proposals first focus on higher-order thinking skills and emphasize broad concepts such as systems, change, conflict, and trade-offs; second, they recommend moving to a deeper curriculum and away from the current practice of covering a broad array of topics rather superficially.

Third, proposed curricula move away from the notion of stand-alone courses. Instead, they introduce topics in early grades and cover them in progressively more rigorous ways throughout a student's school career. Fourth, these proposals integrate the practical and the academic. The emphasis is that academic learning should be inquiry-based, and that practical or vocational training should not be divorced from conceptual learning.

Another approach seeks to alter the process of classroom instruction. The most far-reaching (and controversial) proposals call for the elimination of ability tracking. The effect of tracking on student achievement is not clear. Studies that have identified some differences in achievement found that benefits accrued to students in the academic tracks, with essentially no achievement gains for those in lower tracks.

The clearest evidence relates to differential learning *opportunities*. Students in lower tracks receive less rigorous and lower-quality instruction that fragments concepts instead of treating topics in depth and involves rote memory instead of critical thinking. Further, more experienced and effective teachers are disproportionately assigned to higher tracks.

The massive, costly effort of materials development and teacher training may actually be the most straightforward task. The larger challenges lie in convincing teachers and the general public that new approaches are preferable, and in reconciling large-scale curriculum reform with other reforms that seek to decentralize authority and grant teachers autonomy over teaching.

Strengthening School-Community Links

Even the best-run schools cannot overcome the effects of poverty and the related problems of child abuse, drug addiction, and delinquency on their own. Even in particularly effective schools, family background is the best predictor of student achievement.

One set of proposals envisions the school as a "settlement house" or focal point for delivery of a variety of services, including child care and parenting education, job counseling and training, preventive health care, and substance abuse treatment. Another model advocates greater collaboration with the business community and with colleges and various cultural organizations.

In contrast to the research supporting curricular or teaching reforms, there is no solid evidence that collaborative projects have a significant impact on student learning. The evidence from most other collaborative projects is spotty. It would be very difficult to determine what effect programs one step removed from the classroom (e.g., school-based health clinics) have on student learning. It is not even clear whether these programs lead to other desired outcomes such as higher self-esteem or a willingness to stay in school.

One major problem of collaboration stems from linking schools with social service agencies involving multiple programs and funding streams, inconsistent eligibility criteria, splintered organization of interest groups, and legislative jurisdictions that preserve service fragmentation. Further confounding this fragmentation is the way students are referred to various services. Delivery of social services is exceedingly informal, usually depending on relations among staff and on their personal knowledge and judgment about services.

Even with the best of intentions, collaboration will not come easily or cheaply. Long-standing political, bureaucratic, and professional barriers need to be overturned. All participants need to understand that achieving their particular goal for youth is more likely under collaborative arrangements than with continuing fragmentation. For schools, the challenge is to be actively involved in such collaboration without letting it divert them from their primary educational mission.

Conclusions

The promise of restructuring lies in the strategies that have emerged from the natural variation among schools, the experience of other countries, the exemplary practices of creative educators, and a growing number of pilot projects. The challenge in fulfilling that promise is threefold. The first is to determine which of the many reform strategies are most likely to improve student learning. Not all are worth an equal investment of time and effort. The second is to move beyond the unique circumstances that have inspired various restructuring proposals and to implement those strategies on a widespread basis in schools with varying student needs, goals, and resources. The third is to ensure that the promise of restructuring is not diluted by a kind of tokenism that merely adopts the rhetoric of reform.

None of the major pitfalls is insurmountable, but most have not yet been addressed by reformers. To ignore them is likely to relegate school restructuring to the graveyard of educational fads.

First, although reform is typically justified in terms of student outcomes, the benefits we most often hear about are teacher empowerment, parental choice, and public credibility. Defenders of the status quo may very well argue that while restructuring represents opportunities for power shifts, it does not have a great deal to do with students.

Consequently, the link between American education problems and solutions must be made more explicit. Although the current state of research is insufficient to establish a causal link between these strategies and student outcomes, at least a logical link should be specified, showing the progression of changes likely to be associated with a particular restructuring proposal. This will give policymakers and the public a basis for understanding what they would be purchasing with their money and support, and educators a clear gauge for judging the effectiveness of restructuring efforts.

The second potential pitfall is that each of the major restructuring strategies addresses different parts of the educational system. Educational problems are multi-faceted, and some combination of reforms is needed. However, few efforts are being made to design a comprehensive strategy. Worse yet, some restructuring proponents are isolated from one another. This is particularly true for those advocating changes in the organization of schooling and those espousing different curriculum and teaching methods. For effective reform, these two groups must be joined. No one has even attempted to come to terms with the basic conflict between the decentralizing requirements of one reform and the centralizing direction of another.

Third, scant attention has been paid to basic feasibility questions. Society cannot implement a fundamentally different curriculum or ask teachers to assume the role of gatekeepers for an array of social services without providing training, time, and opportunity to develop new operating procedures. But no one has yet made a systematic attempt to determine how much time, effort, and resources such changes would require.

Policymakers and educators need at least a rough balance sheet showing the relative feasibility of different alternatives—the level of new resources required, the extent to which existing resources would need to be reallocated, the new staff capacity required, and the expected time for implementing proposed changes.

Finally, restructuring raises profound questions. Is the market mechanism in choice plans consistent with the broader goals of public education? How can the demands of professional accountability be reconciled with those of democratic accountability? How can curricula meet expert standards of sound subject-matter knowledge, and not violate the norms of diverse local communities? If restructuring is to work, the implications of those changes for the allocation of democratic values need to be articulated before they are put into effect.

Hope and optimism are the most important characteristics of all the strategies to restructure American schools. These proposals represent a belief that educators and others who care about public schooling have the energy and capacity to implement new approaches, and that the system can be improved. Restructuring offers new promise for solving the twin problems of poor educational performance and shifting economic demands. To avoid the pitfalls inherent in such large-scale endeavors, the proponents of restructuring must move beyond just selling their good ideas and begin the much more difficult work of policy design and implementation.

—Lorraine M. McDonnell
Senior Political Scientist
The RAND Corporation/Santa Monica

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (212) 678-3433. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

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